Beyond Airport Operations: Building a Career in Airport Marketing

For many graduates of an **MBA in Aviation & Airport Management**, airport operations may seem like the obvious career direction. Passenger handling, terminal operations, ground services, airport administration, and operational coordination are familiar parts of the industry.

But an airport is much more than an operational facility.

An airport is a business that connects airlines with passengers, destinations with travellers, retailers with customers, and tourism organisations with international markets. Behind these relationships is another function that is easy to overlook: airport marketing.

For an aviation graduate who becomes interested in customers, branding, market research, partnerships, and business development, airport marketing raises an interesting question:

How does marketing actually work when the product is an airport, a network of routes, and, in many cases, the destination itself?

The answer starts with one of the most important things an airport has to do: attract and retain airline connectivity.

What Is Airport Marketing?

Airport marketing is not simply about advertising an airport to passengers.

An airport has several audiences, and each one looks at the airport differently. Passengers may care about convenience, connectivity, facilities, shopping, dining, and the overall travel experience. Airlines are more concerned with passenger demand, route potential, airport facilities, operating conditions, and whether a market fits their network. Tourism organisations want more visitors, while retailers and commercial partners want access to passengers.

This means airport marketing can cover airline and route development, passenger communication, destination promotion, airport branding, commercial activity, and partnerships.

These areas are closely connected. An airport may first need to convince an airline to operate a route. Once the route exists, the airport and airline may need to create demand for it. A tourism organisation may then help promote the destination, while the airport benefits from the passenger traffic and related commercial activity.

So airport marketing is not just about promoting the airport. It is about helping the airport become more attractive to the airlines, passengers, businesses, and destinations connected to it.

The Airport's First Marketing Customer May Be the Airline

When people hear the term airport marketing, they often imagine campaigns aimed at passengers.

But before a passenger can book a flight on a new route, an airline has to decide to operate that route.

That makes airlines one of the most important audiences for airport marketing and route development teams.

An airport seeking to attract a new airline service may need to demonstrate market demand. It could look at business travel, leisure traffic, visiting friends and relatives, tourism, connecting passengers, competition, and the economic activity surrounding the destination.

The airline then assesses the opportunity from its own commercial perspective. It may ask whether enough passengers will pay suitable fares, whether aircraft are available, whether the schedule fits its network, and whether the route can perform during both peak and weaker seasons.

That changes the marketing question.

The airport is not simply saying, "We want more passengers." It needs to answer, "Why should this airline believe that operating here makes commercial sense?"

This is where an aviation background can become useful for someone working in marketing. A person who understands airport operations, airline networks, passenger demand, and route economics can approach an airline proposition differently from someone who only sees the problem as a communications exercise.

Changi provides a useful example. Its 2024 year-in-review reported that the airport added 20 new passenger city links and welcomed seven new passenger airlines during the year, expanding its connectivity as travel demand recovered.

How Route Development Actually Works

Imagine an airport wants to attract a new international route.

The first step is identifying whether there is a real market opportunity. Research might show strong demand between two cities, growing tourism activity, an underserved business market, or a gap in the existing network.

The airport can then approach an airline with information about the opportunity and its own proposition. That proposition could include the size of the catchment area, passenger demand, destination appeal, airport facilities, connectivity,y and the wider commercial environment.

The airline evaluates the route from its own perspective. It may consider aircraft availability, schedules, expected fares, competition, airport costs, connecting traffic, seasonality, and how the service fits into its network.

If the airline launches the route, the focus changes again. The airport and airline now need passengers to use the service, and tourism organisations may become involved in promoting the destination.

India's UDAN programme provides a useful example of how airline demand and airport connectivity can intersect. The Ministry of Civil Aviation describes UDAN as a market-driven scheme in which interested airlines assess demand on specific routes and submit proposals during the bidding process. The scheme also provides support such as Viability Gap Funding and concessions to help attract services to underserved airports.

For someone interested in airport marketing, understanding the route's business case comes before promoting it.

How Airlines Evaluate an Airport and Route

An airport may see a new route as an opportunity to increase connectivity. An airline sees it as a commercial decision.

Suppose two airports are competing to attract the same airline. The airline could compare passenger demand, business and leisure traffic, connecting opportunities, airport charges, available slots, terminal capacity, ground handling, aircraft turnaround requirements, competition, and tourism potential.

It also needs to consider whether the route fits its existing network.

An airline with a strong hub operation may value connecting passengers differently from a carrier focused mainly on point-to-point traffic. A low-cost airline may assess the airport differently from a full-service carrier. A seasonal leisure route may also require a different business case from a year-round business route.

For an airport marketer, understanding these differences matters. The question is not simply, "How do we promote this airport?" It is, "What does this airline need, and can the airport present a proposition that answers that need?"

That is where airport marketing starts to look less like conventional advertising and more like a combination of market research, business development, relationship management, and aviation knowledge.

How the Route Is Then Marketed to Passengers

Once an airline agrees to operate the route, the marketing challenge moves closer to the passenger.

The airline may promote the service through fares, schedules, destination campaigns, loyalty benefits, digital advertising, and its own booking channels. The airport may communicate the new connectivity and promote the convenience of using its facilities. A tourism organisation may focus on attractions, hotels, experiences, and reasons to visit the destination.

The organisations have different objectives, but they are working around the same passenger.

This is where airport marketing can become collaborative rather than being controlled by one organisation. A new route can involve market research, airline promotion, airport communications, and destination marketing simultaneously.

The airport's role does not necessarily end when the aircraft begins operating. It may continue working with the airline and other partners to support the route and maintain demand.

Changi: When Airport, Airline and Tourism Marketing Come Together

Changi is one of the clearest examples of this model.

In its FY2024/25 reporting, Changi Airport Group describes its continued Partnership with Singapore Airlines and the Singapore Tourism Board to promote Singapore as a stopover destination. The Partnership included a dedicated microsite offering stopover packages, accommodation offers, and curated experiences, with marketing activity targeting international markets.

The example becomes more interesting when the three organisations are viewed together. Changi Airport Group provides the gateway and connectivity, Singapore Airlines provides the flights and airline relationship, and the Singapore Tourism Board promotes Singapore as a destination.

The marketing proposition is therefore larger than any one organisation. The airport wants passengers to use its connectivity, the airline wants customers to book flights, and the tourism board wants visitors to stay in Singapore.

Changi's passenger numbers also show the scale of the operation. It handled 67.7 million passenger movements during calendar year 2024, according to its year-in-review

report. Its FY2024/25 annual report, covering the financial year ending March 2025, recorded 68.4 million passenger movements. These are different reporting periods, so the two figures should not be treated as conflicting statistics.

For someone studying aviation marketing, Changi demonstrates why airport marketing cannot be viewed only through passenger advertising. It is also about the relationships that help create and support the passenger journey.

Dubai: Marketing as a Distinct Airport Function

Dubai provides a different example.

Here, the important point is not simply the number of passengers who use the airport. It is how marketing fits into the airport organisation itself.

Dubai Airports' current careers structure places Marketing & Communications and Commercial within its corporate functions, separately from Service & Operations. The Commercial area includes asset revenue, concession revenue, and brand management and corporate communications, while Service & Operations covers operational areas of the airport.

That distinction matters when thinking about airport marketing as a career. Marketing is not simply an extra responsibility added to an airport operations role. At a major airport organisation, it can exist as a dedicated professional function alongside commercial, strategy, and operational teams.

The scale of Dubai International also shows why these functions can become broad. Dubai Airports says DXB welcomed 95.2 million guests in 2025 and was connected to 291 destinations through 108 international carriers.

At that scale, marketing can involve brand management, communications, passenger engagement, commercial activity, and relationships with airlines and other partners.

For an aviation graduate considering a marketing career, that distinction is useful because it shows that airport marketing is an actual business function, not simply a variation of airport advertising.

Heathrow: When the Airport Becomes a Destination-Marketing Channel

Heathrow shows another side of airport marketing.

An airport can use its physical environment to promote the destination beyond the airport itself.

In 2018, Heathrow launched its Tourism Takeover, a £1 million initiative developed with the UK Government's GREAT campaign. The project used large installations around the airport to showcase destinations across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to international passengers.

The idea was simple but effective. Passengers travelling through Heathrow were already an international audience, so the airport environment became a place where destinations could be presented directly to them.

The campaign continued in different forms. In 2019, Heathrow transformed Terminal 3's Gate 23 into a Welsh-themed gate room in conjunction with Visit Wales. The space featured Welsh landmarks and scenic destinations and was designed to encourage passengers to consider Wales for their next trip. Heathrow stated that hundreds of thousands of passengers passed through Gate 23 each year.

Heathrow had also previously worked with the GREAT campaign to display more than 200 images promoting Britain and Northern Ireland across Terminal 3. Heathrow said it donated £500,000 worth of advertising space for the campaign.

These examples demonstrate something that a conventional definition of airport marketing can easily miss.

An airport is not only a place through which people travel. It can also become a marketing channel for the destination.

What Does Airport Marketing Actually Include?

The examples from Changi, Dubai, and Heathrow show that airport marketing can cover several different activities.

Airline and route development involves understanding markets, identifying potential routes, and working with airlines to support new or expanded connectivity.

Passenger marketing focuses on airport services, facilities, offers, experiences, and communications.

Destination marketing connects airports with tourism boards, hotels, attractions,s and government organisations to encourage visitors.

Airport branding shapes how passengers, airlines, commercial partners, and the wider public perceive the airport.

Commercial marketing supports areas such as retail, food and beverage, advertising, lounges, and parking.

Partnership marketing brings airlines, tourism organisations, businesses, and other stakeholders together around a common objective.

These activities can overlap. A new international route, for example, could involve route research, airline negotiations, destination promotion, passenger campaigns, and commercial planning.

That is why airport marketing sits across several parts of the airport business.

How Airline Marketing Fits Into the Picture

The airport is not the only organisation marketing the journey.

Once a route exists, the airline has to sell seats. This is where airline marketing becomes relevant to an airport marketer.

An airline may divide its passengers into groups such as business travellers, leisure travellers, and people visiting friends and relatives. Each group can have different priorities. A business traveller may care about schedule, flexibility and loyalty benefits, while a leisure traveller may respond more strongly to fare and destination appeal.

Airlines also combine marketing with pricing and revenue management. The same seat does not necessarily sell at one fixed price. Advance-purchase rules, demand, fare conditions,s and timing can all affect what different passengers pay.

The airline's product can also extend beyond the base fare. Baggage, seat selection, meals, upgrades, and lounge access can become part of the customer's purchase.

Loyalty programmes create another relationship with passengers, while distribution through airline websites, travel agencies, online travel agencies,s and global distribution systems determines how customers reach the product.

This does not mean airport marketers need to become airline pricing specialists. They need enough understanding to see how the airline thinks about the passenger and why an airline may market a route differently from the way an airport markets its connectivity.

The airport and airline are partners, but they are not selling exactly the same thing.

What an MBA Aviation Graduate Brings to Airport Marketing

This is where an aviation background can become useful.

A general marketing graduate might approach a problem through the customer, market, brand, and campaign. An aviation graduate can add another layer by considering the relationship between the passenger, airline, airport, route, destination, and wider commercial environment.

That does not mean an aviation qualification automatically makes someone a marketing professional. Marketing skills still need to be developed, but aviation knowledge can change the questions you ask: why does an airline want this route, which passenger segments matter, what makes the destination attractive, and how might a new route affect airport revenue and commercial activity?

Those are marketing questions, but they require an understanding of aviation to answer them properly.

For students considering a career in aviation management, the choice of education can also matter. An MBA that combines management principles with aviation and airport subjects can provide a useful base for someone who wants to understand both the business and operational sides of the industry before moving towards areas such as marketing, commercial development, or route planning.

What Skills Matter?

An aviation graduate interested in airport marketing does not need to become an expert in every area of marketing immediately.

A strong foundation would include market research, segmentation, consumer behaviour, positioning, branding, campaign planning,g and customer experience. Digital skills such as content, search, social media, and analytics can then support those fundamentals.

At the same time, aviation knowledge should remain part of the profile. Understanding airline business models, airport economics, route development, passenger flows,s and commercial activity can help connect marketing decisions to the way the airport actually operates.

Business skills matter too. Airport marketing often involves working with airlines, tourism organisations, government bodies, retailers,rs and other partners, so communication, presentation, data interpretation, and negotiation can all become useful.

The aim is to understand how marketing decisions affect an aviation business, rather than simply collecting a list of marketing tools.

Where Can Airport Marketing Lead?

Airport marketing does not always fall under a single standard job title.

Depending on the organisation, related roles can sit within marketing and communications, route development, commercial, business development, customer experience, destination marketing, or brand management.

A route-development position may involve market research and airline relationships. A commercial role may involve passenger behaviour and partnerships. A communications position may include brand campaigns and stakeholder communication.

This is why graduates should look beyond the word "marketing" when searching for opportunities. The responsibilities matter more than the title.

For someone with an MBA in Aviation & Airport Management, that can open several possible directions without requiring a complete move away from aviation.

The Airport Marketing Journey

The entire process can be understood through one example.

An airport identifies a market where additional connectivity could work. It researches passenger demand and builds a case for the opportunity, then approaches an airline and presents the market, destination, and airport proposition.

The airline evaluates the route based on demand, competition, aircraft availability, schedules, costs, and network fit. If the route launches, the marketing focus shifts to creating passenger demand, with the airport and airline promoting the new connection while tourism organisations promote the destination.

As passengers begin using the route, the airport can also benefit from commercial activity across retail, food and beverage, advertising, parking, and other services. The airport and airline can then evaluate the route's performance and decide whether changes to frequency, schedules, marketing,g or other elements are needed.

This is why route development works so well for understanding airport marketing. It connects the airport's relationship with airlines to the passenger's eventual travel decision.

Is Airport Marketing a Good Fit After an MBA in Aviation & Airport Management?

The answer depends on what part of aviation interests you most.

If you enjoy operational coordination, passenger handling, safety, ground operations, and real-time airport decisions, airport operations may remain the better fit. If you are more interested in customers, market research, branding, partnerships, communication, business development, and strategy, airport marketing is another direction worth considering.

The advantage of an MBA in Aviation & Airport Management is that you already have exposure to the industry in which marketing takes place. You understand that an airport is not an isolated business; it depends on airlines, passengers, destinations, retailers, tourism organisations and other partners.

Marketing connects many of those relationships, so an aviation graduate can build marketing skills on top of an existing understanding of the industry.

Conclusion

Airport marketing starts well before a passenger sees an advertisement. An airport may first need to convince an airline that a route has potential, then work with the airline and tourism organisations to create passenger demand. Changi, Dubai, and Heathrow each

showcase different aspects of that process, from joint route and destination marketing to dedicated marketing functions and airport-based tourism campaigns.

For an MBA graduate in Aviation & Airport Management, this creates a way to build a marketing career without leaving the aviation industry. Aviation knowledge provides context, while marketing skills offer another way to work with airlines, passengers, destinations, and commercial partners.

MH Cockpit's MBA Aviation Management pathway is built around exactly this combination: aviation context first, with management skills layered on top. Explore the programme to see how that foundation can prepare you for roles across airports, airlines, and the wider aviation business.